

Rules of the Game

All About Initiative (Part Three)

By Skip Williams

Last week, we considered the ins and outs beginning an encounter. This week, we'll tackle an even more difficult topic -- deciding when an encounter is over. After that, we'll wrap up our look at initiative by considering a few related topics.

When Does an Encounter End?

The rules don't give much guidance about deciding when an encounter is over. Nevertheless, the **DM** is obliged to declare an end to one encounter before the party can move on to the next encounter. As noted in Part One, declaring an encounter's end also can speed play by allowing **player characters** a chance to recover and reorganize without the burden of working though the initiative order over and over again. Also, there's at least one effect in the game that lasts for the duration of an encounter. A **character** (usually a **barbarian**) who has used the rage class feature remains **fatigued** for the duration of an encounter. Because the fatigue resulting from barbarian rage ends when the encounter ends, determining exactly when the encounter ends can prove crucial.

In Part One, I suggested that characters should remain in initiative order until all danger the encounter poses to them is past. That also is a pretty good rule of thumb for marking an encounter's end. Any or all of the following conditions might signal an encounter's end:

- All foes the party faces in an encounter are defeated.

Foes are defeated when they're dead, dying, or otherwise unable to function offensively. **Creatures** that have fled the encounter or surrendered should be considered defeated for purposes of marking an encounter's end.

Sometimes, a foe might withdraw for a short time and then return to mount a new attack. If the returning foe has been away for significant time (say a full minute, or 10 **rounds**) and the party either has not bothered to locate the foe or hasn't made any effective efforts to do so, it's probably best to treat the return as a new encounter.

If a foe flees and the party pursues closely enough so that the foe must keep moving to avoid being attacked, the encounter isn't over until the party breaks off the pursuit. Likewise, if the party can pursue and attack (perhaps with spells or ranged weaponry), the encounter isn't over.

- All members of the party are defeated.

Use the same criteria for defeat noted above.

- Both sides agree to cease hostilities.

This could be a plainly stated agreement to stop fighting, or both sides might choose to withdraw from the battlefield (or at least put some space between each other).

Combatants could possibly effectively enter a truce simply by ceasing all hostile actions, but stand their ground. If an encounter enters a phase where nobody is attacking a foe and the two groups simply talk or observe each other, you might wish to declare the encounter over. You can use the same criteria suggested above for dealing with a foe that leaves the scene of a battle and returns to fight later. If the truce has held for about a minute and it seems nobody is inclined to fight, go ahead and declare the encounter over. You can do that even if you've got one or two suspicious holdouts on either (or both sides). Such characters might ready actions to resume combat if anyone makes a false move. It's perfectly okay to allow the diehards in a group to stand there, tense and scowling, while everyone else relaxes.

Of course, hostilities might break out again, marking the beginning of a new encounter. A group that finds itself in a bad situation might want to feign a truce just to get the chance to jump the foe again. If you're in doubt about whether to start a new encounter with a new initiative order or to simply resume the action with the old initiative order, use an appropriate skill check to determine if the "previous" encounter ever really came to an end. A Diplomacy check that moves a foe's attitude from hostile to unfriendly (or more favorable) would do the trick (decisively ending hostilities). A Bluff check to put a foe at least temporarily at ease also would do the trick.

If you decide to continue using an old initiative order, simply pick up the action starting with whichever combatant has decided to resume hostilities (adjusting for any readied actions left over from the previous encounter).

If you decide to use a new initiative order, place anyone who has a readied action at the beginning of the order (to reflect the character's state of wariness). If several characters have readied actions, place them in order of their initiative modifiers, and use **initiative** checks to break any ties). Creature that don't have readied actions check initiative normally, except that they're placed in the order after creatures with readied actions.

It's usually best to skip the **surprise** round when the action resumes after a break in hostilities. If someone has really managed to hoodwink the opposition and has made them lower their guard, however, a surprise round might be in order. In such a case, the deceitful character (and any allies who are in on the ruse) should be the only character (or characters) who act during the surprise round, even though many other characters at the scene are aware of their foes.

Some Initiative Miscellany

A few other aspects of initiative can cause trouble from time to time. Usually a careful look at the rules -- or a little common sense -- will solve the problem.

Delaying and Readying

As noted in Part One, both of these options can change the initiative order during a battle. The ready and delay actions are discussed in detail on page 160 in the *Player's Handbook*, and in [Rules of the Game: All About Actions](#). Here are a few more notes:

From the page 160 of the *Player's Handbook*:

Special Initiative Actions

Here are ways to change when you act during combat by altering your place in the initiative order.

Delay

By choosing to delay, you take no action and then act normally on whatever initiative count you decide to act. When you delay, you voluntarily reduce your own initiative result for the rest of the combat. When your new, lower initiative count comes up later in the same round, you can act normally. You can specify this new initiative result or just wait until some time later in the round and act then, thus fixing your new initiative count at that point.

Delaying is useful if you need to see what your friends or opponents are going to do before deciding what to do yourself. The price you pay is lost initiative. You never get back the time you spend waiting to see what's going to happen. You can't, however, interrupt anyone else's action (as you can with a readied action).

Initiative Consequences of Delaying: Your initiative result becomes the count on which you took the delayed action. If you come to your next action and have not yet performed an action, you don't get to take a delayed action (though you can delay again). If you take a delayed action in the next round, before your regular turn comes up, your initiative count rises to that new point in the order of battle, and you do not get your regular action that round.

Ready

The ready action lets you prepare to take an action later, after your turn is over but before your next one has begun. Readying is a standard action. It does not provoke an attack of opportunity (though the action that you ready might do so).

Readying an Action: You can ready a standard action, a move action, or a free action. To do so, specify the action you will take and the conditions under which you will take it. For example, you might specify that you will shoot an arrow at anyone coming through a nearby doorway. Then, any time before your next action, you may take the readied action in response to that condition. The action occurs just before the action that triggers it. If the triggered action is part of another character's activities, you interrupt the other character. Assuming he is still capable of doing so, he continues his actions once you complete your readied action.

Your initiative result changes. For the rest of the encounter, your initiative result is the count on which you took the readied action, and you act immediately ahead of the character whose action triggered your readied action.

You can take a 5-foot step as part of your readied action, but only if you don't otherwise move any distance during the round. For instance, if you move up to an open door and then ready an action to swing your sword at whatever comes near, you can't take a 5-foot step along with the readied action (since you've already moved in this round). **Initiative Consequences of Readying:** Your initiative result

becomes the count on which you took the readied action. If you come to your next action and have not yet performed your readied action, you don't get to take the readied action (though you can ready the same action again). If you take your readied action in the next round, before your regular turn comes up, your initiative count rises to that new point in the order of battle, and you do not get your regular action that round.

Distracting Spellcasters: You can ready an attack against a spellcaster with the trigger "if she starts casting a spell." If you damage the spellcaster, she may lose the spell she was trying to cast (as determined by her Concentration check result).

Readyng to Counterspell: You may ready a counterspell against a spellcaster (often with the trigger "if she starts casting a spell"). In this case, when the spellcaster starts a spell, you get a chance to identify it with a Spellcraft check (DC 15 + spell level). If you do, and if you can cast that same spell (are able to cast it and have it prepared, if you prepare spells), you can cast the spell as a counterspell and automatically ruin the other spellcaster's spell. Counterspelling works even if one spell is divine and the other arcane.

A spellcaster can use *dispel magic* (page 223) to counterspell another spellcaster, but it doesn't always work.

Readyng a Weapon against a Charge: You can ready certain piercing weapons, setting them to receive charges (see Table 7-5: Weapons, page 116). A readied weapon of this type deals double damage if you score a hit with it against a charging character.

Delay: Delay is a nonaction. That is, it doesn't use up any of your time in a round. When delaying, you can specify a point in a round when you want to act (for example, right after a particular ally acts, or any other point you can manage to specify). Or you can simply wait until the time seems right and take your turn.

When you act, you assume that turn in the initiative order for the remainder of the encounter (unless you ready or delay again). For example, you act first in a round, with an initiative result of 20. An ally acts next with an initiative result 18, followed by foes with initiative results of 13, 11, and 8, and a final ally with an initiative result of 2. If you delay until your first foe acts, you take your turn after that foe, and that means you act between initiative counts 13 and 11 (effectively at count 12). You cannot interrupt the action your foe takes at count 13, but you have a full round's worth of actions (that is a standard action plus a move action, or a full-round action) to use during your delayed turn.

You can use a delay to act *earlier* in the initiative order. To do so, you must delay and then wait to act until the next round begins (as noted in Part One, a new round begins after the last combatant in the previous round has acted).

Let's say the combat in the previous example continues. Thanks to your earlier delay, you're now the third combatant to act in the initiative order (the new order is now 18, 13, 12, 11, 8, 2). If you delay until after the round ends (after the combatant with the initiative result of 2 acts), you can choose to act before anyone else acts in the following round. Once you do so, you'll keep your new position in the initiative order until you (or another combatant) changes the initiative order again.

So, what happens if two combatants delay and decide to act in the same place in the round? I recommend resolving the situation the same way you resolve tied initiative checks. The combatant with the highest initiative modifier goes first and if the two combatants have the same initiative modifier, they make initiative checks to break the tie.

Ready: Ready is a standard action that allows you to prepare another standard action or a move action at some later point in the round. You must specify some condition that triggers your readied action.

Ready has advantages and disadvantages when compared to delay. The main advantage ready has over delay is that you resolve your readied action before the event that triggers it and you sometimes can disrupt a foe's action, such as when you ready an action to distract a spellcaster.

The main disadvantage ready has versus delay is that you can ready only a standard or move action -- you don't get a full round's worth of actions when you ready.

The other big disadvantage to readying is that you're pretty well stuck if things don't go according to plan. For example, suppose you ready an attack against the first enemy that comes through a door and a 20-ton boulder rolls out instead. You're pretty much obliged to stand there and get crushed (though one hopes you'll be allowed a Reflex save to avoid the worst effects) even though you theoretically have an action available to you when the boulder makes its entrance. Encounters in the game are just too fast-moving and confusing to allow you to change plans between your turns in the initiative order.

When you use your readied action, you move to that place in the initiative order, and you stay at your new place until the order changes again. The change in the initiative order works pretty much as described in the section on delay, except that you act before the event that triggers your readied action.

Inactive Characters

Characters who have been rendered inactive (for example, by being **paralyzed** or reduced to negative **hit points**) can become active again after whatever ails them is removed. According to the *Player's Handbook*, these characters retain their places in the initiative order and can act again when their next turns come. The rules don't say so, but it's best to assume that these characters are not flat-footed when they reenter the fray (because they never really left).

This rule, while easy to use and remember, can produce some odd results from time to time. For example, if you return to the action just before your next turn, you get to act right away. If you return just after your turn comes up, however, you must wait an entire round to act. To make a character's return to activity a little more predictable, try this completely unofficial rule: Allow a character who has missed at least one turn due to involuntary inactivity to act immediately after being revived. The effect on the character's initiative is exactly the same as it would be if the revived character had delayed for a round or more.

In Conclusion

That wraps up our look at initiative. I've attempted to cover a few gaps in the initiative rules. The **D&D** game being what it is, you'll probably encounter a few more tricky areas. When you deal with these, remember that the key decision you have to make is whether an encounter has already begun or is merely about to begin. Once you've made that determination, the rest of your task should prove fairly simple.

About the Author

Skip Williams keeps busy with freelance projects for several different game companies and was the Sage of *Dragon Magazine* for many years. Skip is a co-designer of the **D&D** 3rd Edition game and the chief architect of the *Monster Manual*. When not devising swift and cruel deaths for player characters, Skip putters in his kitchen or garden (rabbits and deer are not Skip's friends) or works on repairing and improving the century-old farmhouse that he shares with his wife, Penny, and a growing menagerie of pets.

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